

Analysis of social support network for left-behind children in rural areas

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyze the social support network of rural left-behind children, revealing the key factors and mechanisms involved, in order to provide theoretical support and policy suggestions for addressing this issue. Firstly, the background and current situation of rural left-behind children are introduced, followed by an exploration of the concept of social support network and its role in addressing social issues. Then, the constituent elements and characteristics of the social support network for rural left-behind children are analyzed, including support from family, relatives, neighbors, community, and government. Finally, based on the analysis results, suggestions are proposed to strengthen the social support network for rural left-behind children, including measures such as improving policies, enhancing community services, and increasing family support capacity.

Keywords: Rural left-behind children; social support network; family

1. Introduction

In rural areas of China, the issue of left-behind children has always been a concern of society. With the acceleration of urbanization and the increasing migration of rural laborers for work, the number of rural left-behind children has been continuously rising, attracting widespread social attention. Left-behind children refer to minors whose parents are absent from home for a long time due to work or other reasons, leaving them under the care of other family members or living alone. They face many problems such as lack of family care, psychological loneliness, and inadequate educational resources, which have adverse effects on their physical and mental health and comprehensive development. In response to the issue of rural left-behind children, the social support network is considered an important coping mechanism. The social support network refers to a support network composed of multiple levels including family, relatives, neighbors, community, and government, which can provide support and assistance in various aspects such as material, emotional, informational, and social participation. In the growth process of rural left-behind children, the social support network plays an important role, as it can compensate for family deficiencies, provide emotional support, offer education and protection, and thus is of great significance in alleviating the difficulties faced by left-behind children. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the social support network of rural left-behind children, revealing the key factors and mechanisms involved, and providing theoretical support and policy suggestions for addressing this issue. Through in-depth analysis of the constituent elements, problems and challenges, and suggestions for strengthening the social support network for rural left-behind children, it is hoped that this paper can provide useful reference and guidance for improving the living conditions of rural left-behind children.

2. Overview of the problem of rural left-behind children

2.1 Definition and characteristics of rural left-behind children

Rural left-behind children refer to minors who, due to reasons such as parents' long-term migration for work, farming, or divorce, are left living alone or with other family members (usually grandparents or other relatives) in rural areas. Left-behind children typically experience the absence of parents, living in relatively isolated environments with a lack of emotional care and educational guidance. The characteristics of this phenomenon mainly include the following aspects: Family separation: Parents of rural left-behind children often work or reside elsewhere for long periods, resulting in family separation. This separation leads to a lack of parent-child communication and support, negatively impacting the

psychological well-being and development of left-behind children. Transfer of guardianship responsibility: Due to parents' absence, the guardianship responsibility of left-behind children is usually taken on by other family members, such as grandparents or relatives. These caregivers are often elderly and have limited education, unable to provide sufficient emotional and educational support to the left-behind children, leaving them in a vulnerable state of protection. Lack of educational resources: Due to the relative scarcity of educational resources in the areas where left-behind children reside, they often cannot access quality education opportunities. Lack of parental attention and guidance may affect the academic performance and motivation of left-behind children, increasing uncertainties in their future development. Psychological health issues: Long-term lack of family care and companionship makes left-behind children prone to loneliness, anxiety, depression, and other psychological problems[1]. During their growth, they may face challenges such as self-identity confusion and difficulties in interpersonal relationships, posing potential threats to their psychological well-being. In summary, the issue of rural left-behind children is not only a family phenomenon but also a social problem. Understanding their definition and characteristics helps to analyze in-depth the causes, mechanisms, and solutions to this issue, thereby providing a scientific basis for formulating relevant policies and carrying out practical work.

2.2 Causes of left-behind children in rural areas

The formation of the problem of rural left-behind children is a complex and multi-dimensional process. Firstly, labor outflow from rural areas in China is one of the main reasons. Due to the relatively underdeveloped rural economy and limited employment opportunities, many rural residents choose to work in cities or elsewhere for a better life, leaving their children behind as left-behind children. Secondly, the lack of educational resources in rural areas is also an important factor. Compared to urban areas, rural areas have fewer schools, inadequate teaching staff, and poor teaching facilities. Some parents, due to economic reasons or unfamiliarity with educational resources in the places they work, choose to leave their children at home instead of sending them to schools in cities. Additionally, changes in family structure have exacerbated the issue of left-behind children. With the development of the rural economy and social changes, family structures have become increasingly complex, with increased instances of parental divorce, remarriage, etc., forcing some children to be left behind. Moreover, attitudes towards education and employment pressures also influence the issue of left-behind children. Some families hold traditional beliefs favoring sons over daughters, investing more in the education of sons and less in that of daughters. Lastly, the lack of sound policies and systems is also a factor contributing to the issue of rural left-behind children. The absence of comprehensive policies on family education, child protection, and social welfare leaves the rights of left-behind children inadequately protected, exacerbating the risks and difficulties they face. In summary, the formation of the problem of rural left-behind children involves various factors at economic, social, cultural, and policy levels, necessitating comprehensive strategies for resolution[2].

2.3 Analysis of the status quo of left-behind children in rural areas

Currently, the problem of rural left-behind children persists and is becoming increasingly prominent. Firstly, the number of left-behind children remains substantial, especially in economically underdeveloped areas and places with concentrated labor export. Large numbers of parents migrate for work, resulting in left-behind children becoming a growing special group. Secondly, the problems faced by left-behind children are severe. Long-term absence of parental care and guidance leads them to often feel lonely and helpless emotionally, with psychological health problems becoming increasingly prominent. Additionally, since family guardians are often elderly grandparents or other relatives, their limited abilities in education and psychological counseling prevent them from providing sufficient support and protection to the left-behind children. Furthermore, the shortage of rural educational resources also hampers the development of left-behind children. Many left-behind children receive education in rural areas with low basic education levels and poor school conditions, affecting their academic performance and future development. Although the government and various sectors of society have paid some attention and support to the problem of rural left-behind children, issues such as inadequate policy implementation, uneven distribution of social resources, and incomplete rescue systems still exist in practical work. Therefore, there is a need to further enhance understanding of the problem of rural left-behind children, formulate more practical policy measures, and provide better protection and care for them[3].

3. Social Support Network: Concept and Role

3.1 Concept of Social Support Network

The concept of the social support network encompasses a multi-level, multidimensional support system, consisting of various layers including family, relatives, neighbors, community, and government. It provides support and assistance to individuals in areas such as material, emotional, informational, and social participation. Within this support network, the family serves as the fundamental support unit, offering emotional reliance and material support, acting as a cornerstone for individual growth and development. Beyond the family, relationships with relatives also provide further support and mutual assistance to some extent. The connections and support between relatives often play an important role when individuals encounter difficulties. Neighborly relationships are another crucial component of the social support network. Within close-knit community environments, neighbors often form close connections of mutual assistance and shared development. Friendly relations and a spirit of mutual aid among neighbors provide additional support and security for individuals. Community organizations and public service institutions also play significant roles in the social support network. They offer a broader support network for individuals, including services such as psychological counseling, educational guidance, cultural activities, etc., providing diversified support and assistance. Moreover, the government plays an essential role in the social support network. Through policies and laws, the government provides protection and support to individuals, promoting social equity and stability. Government policies and measures, including assistance to impoverished families and protection of vulnerable groups, are integral parts of the social support network. Through government support and guarantees, individuals can access more resources and opportunities, enhancing their quality of life and sense of well-being. In summary, the social support network not only provides substantial support during crises and stress but also plays a vital role in promoting individual development, growth, and quality of life. Through the social support network, individuals can gain emotional comfort and support, strengthen self-esteem and confidence, alleviate stress and anxiety, enhance adaptability and resilience, thus better coping with various challenges and difficulties in life. Therefore, strengthening the construction of the social support network is of great significance for enhancing overall societal happiness and stability.

3.2 Mechanisms of Social Support Network

The mechanism of the social support network is a multi-level, multidimensional support system that covers aspects such as emotional, informational, material, and social participation support. Firstly, emotional support is one of the core components of the social support network. By providing care, understanding, and support, it helps individuals maintain psychological balance when facing difficulties and challenges, alleviating feelings of loneliness and anxiety, and enhancing self-esteem and confidence. Secondly, informational support plays a crucial role in the social support network, providing practical knowledge, advice, and guidance, enabling individuals to better understand issues, grasp solutions, and improve their ability to cope with challenges effectively and efficiently. Material support is another important component of the social support network, including economic aid, gifts, etc., which help individuals alleviate living difficulties, improve their quality of life, and sense of well-being. Lastly, social participation support is a significant aspect of the social support network, promoting individuals' social interactions and participation, helping to establish good interpersonal relationships and social support networks, enhancing social adaptability and quality of life, and strengthening a sense of social belonging and happiness. In summary, the social support network provides comprehensive support through various forms such as emotional, informational, material, and social participation support, ensuring individuals receive all-round protection, helping them cope with various challenges in life, achieve self-development, and improve their living standards[4].

4. Constituent Elements of the Social Support Network for Rural Left-behind Children

The constituent elements of the social support network for rural left-behind children encompass support and assistance from various levels, including family, relatives, neighbors, community, and government. Firstly, the family serves as the fundamental support unit for rural left-behind children. Despite the absence of parents or guardians, family members remain crucial sources of emotional support and life guidance. Family support is manifested not only in daily care and affection but also in the attention and guidance provided for the growth and development of left-behind children. In the

absence of parents or guardians, other family members may assume additional responsibilities, striving to mitigate the impact of parental absence. Secondly, relatives play a complementary and extended role in the social support network. Apart from immediate family members, relatives of left-behind children may provide additional care and support. These relatives may include grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc., who may have closer emotional ties with the left-behind children and are willing to provide both spiritual and material support. Neighborly relationships also constitute a significant component of the rural social support network. In rural areas, neighborly relations are often closer, with a community atmosphere characterized by mutual assistance and shared development. Neighborly mutual aid and cooperation are evident not only in daily life but also in the care and support provided to left-behind children. Close bonds among neighbors facilitate mutual assistance and collective care for left-behind children, contributing to the creation of a warm and harmonious community environment. At the community level, community organizations and public service institutions offer support services such as psychological counseling, academic tutoring, cultural activities, etc., to left-behind children. These service providers not only offer diverse activities and resources but also provide essential education and life guidance to help children better adapt to social and learning environments. Furthermore, the government provides support and guarantees for rural left-behind children through relevant policies and programs, promoting their comprehensive and healthy growth. Government policies and measures may include economic support for left-behind families, educational incentives for left-behind children, and attention to the psychological well-being of left-behind children [5]. Through government support and guarantees, left-behind children can access more resources and opportunities, helping alleviate the difficulties and pressures they face in life. In conclusion, the constituent elements of the social support network for rural left-behind children encompass support from family, relatives, neighbors, community, and government, providing multi-faceted protection and assistance. These supportive elements collectively form a close-knit social support network, providing solid support for the growth and development of left-behind children.

5. Problems and Challenges of the Social Support Network for Rural Left-behind Children

5.1 Weakening of Family Support

One of the main reasons for the weakening of family support for rural left-behind children is the lack of parental companionship and educational guidance within the family. Due to parents' long-term absence for work or other reasons leading to family separation, the parent-child relationship between left-behind children and their parents is affected, resulting in insufficient emotional communication and care. In many cases, caregivers are often elderly grandparents or other relatives who may lack adequate support and protection for left-behind children due to factors such as age, cultural background, or health conditions. Furthermore, some families experience unstable family structures or strained relationships, further diminishing family support. These issues contribute to left-behind children facing emotional emptiness and educational deficiencies within the family, increasing their challenges in psychological health and social adaptation. Strengthening family support, improving the level of family education, and establishing harmonious and stable family relationships are crucial for improving the living conditions of rural left-behind children. The government and society should increase policy support to provide more educational, economic, and psychological health support to rural families, promote harmonious and stable family relationships, and create a healthier and warmer environment for the growth of left-behind children. Additionally, establishing care institutions for left-behind children to provide necessary psychological counseling and social support to supplement the inadequacies of family support is also an important measure to address this issue.

5.2 Insufficient Community Services

In addition to the weakening of family support, rural left-behind children also face the problem of insufficient community services. In many rural areas, community service facilities and resources are relatively scarce, failing to meet the needs of left-behind children. Firstly, due to the sparse rural population and relatively low level of economic development, many areas lack adequate community service institutions such as kindergartens, children's activity centers, libraries, etc., resulting in a lack of suitable learning and recreational venues for left-behind children. Secondly, community medical and psychological health services in rural areas are relatively backward, leaving left-behind children without timely and effective attention and assistance in physical and psychological health. Furthermore, some community organizations and volunteer groups have insufficient resources and uneven service

quality in serving left-behind children, unable to provide continuous and stable support and assistance. Therefore, rural left-behind children face significant deficiencies and challenges in community services, affecting their comprehensive development and healthy growth. To address this issue, the government needs to increase investment and support for rural community services, improve grassroots community service levels, enhance the community service network, and establish a sound care system for left-behind children. Additionally, it is necessary to guide and organize more social forces to participate in the care of left-behind children, establish volunteer service teams, enrich community service content, and provide more comprehensive and high-quality services and support for left-behind children. Through joint efforts of the government and society, strengthening community services can better protect the rights and interests of rural left-behind children and promote their healthy growth and comprehensive development[6].

6. Strengthening Recommendations for the Social Support Network of Rural Left-behind Children

6.1 Enhance Policy and Regulatory Framework

To strengthen the social support network for rural left-behind children, it is necessary to first improve relevant policies and regulations to safeguard their rights and needs. The government should increase attention to the issue of rural left-behind children and intensify efforts in policy formulation and implementation. Specifically, the government can introduce more specific and targeted protection policies for left-behind children, including strengthening guardianship, education, healthcare, and other aspects, clarifying responsible entities and specific measures to ensure effective policy implementation. Additionally, it should establish a sound policy dissemination mechanism to enhance the publicity and popularization of policies for the protection of the rights of rural left-behind children, raise awareness among left-behind children and their caregivers about policies and their rights, and promote policy implementation and enforcement. Furthermore, the government should strengthen research and monitoring of issues related to rural left-behind children to promptly understand changes in their living conditions and needs, providing scientific basis for policy formulation. Additionally, enhancing coordination and cooperation with relevant departments to form a closed-loop mechanism for policy formulation, implementation, and supervision is crucial to ensure comprehensive, coordinated, and sustained policy execution, promoting the construction and improvement of the social support network for left-behind children. Finally, it is essential to strengthen supervision and evaluation of policy implementation, establish a sound supervision mechanism to identify and address issues promptly, ensuring effective policy implementation and continuous improvement. In summary, improving the policy and regulatory framework is a crucial measure to strengthen the social support network for rural left-behind children, contributing to enhancing care and protection levels for left-behind children and promoting their healthy growth and comprehensive development.

6.2 Enhance Community Service System Construction

The growth environment of rural left-behind children is often directly influenced by the level of community services. Therefore, enhancing the construction of the community service system is crucial to improving the living conditions of left-behind children. Firstly, the government should increase investment in rural community services and improve the construction level of grassroots community service facilities. This includes establishing children's activity centers, libraries, cultural centers, etc., to provide left-behind children with a good learning and recreational environment. These places can organize various extracurricular activities, cultural and artistic training, sports competitions, etc., enriching the leisure lives of left-behind children and promoting their comprehensive development. Secondly, community medical services and psychological health services need to be strengthened. The government can establish a regular health examination system to monitor and manage the physical health of left-behind children. Additionally, organizing psychological health education and counseling activities to help left-behind children effectively cope with psychological pressure and emotional distress caused by family separation and other reasons is crucial. Furthermore, the construction of community organizations and volunteer service forces is also critical. The government can strengthen the training and guidance of volunteers, encouraging them to actively participate in the care of left-behind children. Volunteers can organize various colorful activities such as voluntary counseling classes, cultural performances, handicraft workshops, etc., to provide care and assistance to left-behind children, cultivating their positive attitudes towards life and good social communication skills.

Additionally, the government should encourage and support social organizations, enterprises, and individuals to participate in the care of left-behind children, creating a favorable situation where the whole society cares about and supports left-behind children. This can be achieved by establishing reward mechanisms to commend and reward units and individuals who focus on and support the work of left-behind children, motivating more social forces to participate. Finally, establishing a platform for left-behind children's service information to timely release relevant policy and service information, facilitating left-behind children and their families to understand and enjoy various services. This can strengthen policy publicity and implementation, ensuring that more left-behind children receive care and assistance. In conclusion, enhancing the construction of the community service system is a key step in improving the living conditions of rural left-behind children and building a more complete social support network. Governments, social organizations, and volunteers should work together to provide more comprehensive and high-quality services and care for rural left-behind children, ensuring their healthy growth and happy lives.

7. Conclusion

In rural areas, the issue of left-behind children is a complex and serious social phenomenon, directly affecting the physical and mental health as well as the comprehensive development of these children. This paper discusses the definition, causes, current situation analysis of rural left-behind children issues, as well as the concept and mechanism of social support networks, revealing the difficulties and challenges faced by left-behind children. Based on this foundation, recommendations are proposed to strengthen the social support network for rural left-behind children, including improving policies and regulations and enhancing the construction of community service systems, among others. The implementation of these measures helps to address the inadequacies in support from families, communities, and governments, providing more comprehensive and effective assistance and protection for left-behind children. However, it is also important to recognize that solving the issue of rural left-behind children requires the joint efforts and long-term investment of all sectors of society. Governments, social organizations, volunteers, and the general public should all pay attention to and care about the growth of left-behind children, jointly creating a healthy and happy environment for their growth. Only with the care and support of the entire society can the issue of rural left-behind children be truly resolved, promoting social harmony, stability, and sustainable development.

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